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From Anonymity to Identity: Orality in Three Women Poets from North-East India

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Abstract

The expression 'North-East India' invokes an ethnographic monolith in popular imagination without looking into its multilingual set-up, heterogeneous cultural locations and diverse literary traditions, most of which are unscripted, orally composed and community-specific. Orality, which appears to be a crucial tool to understand the nuances of the literary landscape of this region, assumes a dual role. On the one hand, it is stratified, textualised, homogenised and commodified by the global market. On the other hand, it becomes a tool to challenge anonymity and reclaim the roots of the people, who had been suffering from a rupture in identity since the advent of the colonial education system and the ever-growing dependence on written communication in the modern socio-economic structure. This paper, through a close reading of three women poets of North-East India - namely, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai and Esther Syiem, explores the reclamation of identity through the use of traditional tales, formulaic composition and indigenised vocabulary in their poetry. It also argues how orality is constructed within the ambit of the written text using coloniser's language thereby creating a space for cultural hybridity thus subverting the hierarchy between orality and writing.

Keywords: Orality, Writing, Identity, Culture, Cultural Hybridity.

Grandfather constantly warned
That forgetting the stories
Would be catastrophic:
We would lose our history,
Territory, and most certainly
Our intrinsic identity.
So I told stories...

(Temsula Ao; "The Old Story Teller", 2017)

The stories, the poet is so desperate to tell, are not merely stories. Rather, these are integral parts of the "intrinsic identity" of the diverse communities living in Northeastern India, who have been categorically homogenised, objectified and marginalised by the national imagination since India was perceived as a Nation-State in the colonial period. In the Indian context, whenever the expression 'North-East' is used, apart from signifying a particular geo-political place, connected with the rest of the country only through the narrow Siliguri corridor, it calls forth a monolithic ethnographic identity, referred to either as the "hilly country inhabited by independent tribes" (Allen et al. p. 2), as mentioned by the *Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India*, published before 1947 or as "(t)he *distant* north-eastern part of the subcontinent" (my italics) (National Council of Educational Research and Training 93) as described by NCERT history textbook in Independent

India. Samir Das opined that though “from within[,] it represents one of India’s most diverse and heterogeneous of all regions”, Northeastern India “viewed from outside, looks both homogeneous and distinct from the mainland” (Das, p. 2). This statement reaffirms the imposed outsidersness of this region and the homogenisation of its cultural diversity.

It is needless to say that this piece of land, as it is quite rightly pointed out by Das, houses more than a hundred nationalities of diverse literary and cultural heritage and more than two hundred languages, belonging to different linguistic groups and language families (*North East India*, n.d.). However, many of these languages did not have scripts and all verbal expressions, including art and information, were composed and transmitted orally. Orality had a significant role in the society to sustain social order, legal conventions and communal identities. It was, of course, difficult for the Europeans, for whom writing was regarded “as a vehicle of syllogistic reasoning and as an instrument for consolidation of state power” (Misra, “Speaking, Writing and Coming”, 2013, p. 14), to understand the importance of oral traditions among these “independent tribes”. Hence the diverse population of the Northeastern region became easy ‘subjects’ of their ethnographic ‘discoveries’ and was described without given any distinct identity. Unfortunately, things did not change much after independence. With the borders being drawn for the Independent nation, Northeast became the perennial frontier of the country, secluded from the rest of India, geographically as well as culturally. After globalisation, things took a completely new turn and brought even newer challenges. The orally composed verbal arts became the new signifier of the commodification of “(t)he *distant* north-eastern part of the subcontinent.” Temsula Ao wrote:

The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity. (Cited in Sarkar, 11-12)

But this process did not go unchecked without any resistance as is evident in contemporary artistic and literary expressions. In this context, the poem cited at the beginning of this article, maybe read as evidently invoking the ‘pre-modern’ storytellers and their art of creating distinct cultural repertoires for individual communities. It emphasises the instrumental role stories play to build identities and to reinstate the same. The cultural traditions, which were turned into mere “commodity markers” by the globalised market, are reclaimed not only by TemsulaAo, but also by other contemporary poets from the Northeast and are reused as powerful tools to assert their individual uniqueness and cultural and political agency. In this article, therefore, there has been an attempt to scrutinise how orality is used to reverse the process of “identity to anonymity” in the works of poets from the Northeast, specifically, TemsulaAo, Mamang Dai and Esther Syiem, respectively from Ao, Adi and Khasi community, who, even after having a ‘non-script’ mother tongue, are *writing* their poems in English which can be identified as a “grapholect” or a

“transdialectal language formed by deep commitment to writing” (Ong, 2002, p. 7). This paper studies the poems of Ao, Dai and Syiem as these three poets belong to three different cultural locations that signify the diversities of Northeastern region and at the same time, build a polysystemic network through the use of myths and oral tales and create a platform of shared experiences by assuming the role of traditional storytellers.

This paper will first look into the homogenization of Northeastern culture and how its specific and distinct identity is stripped off by the global market by making it an “anonymous”ⁱ (as it has been identified by TemsulaAo), standardized commodified product and then it will show, how this process is resisted by the three women poets from three distinct Northeastern states and community by creating a heterogeneous, hybrid and dynamic space through the use of “written oral poems.” (see Foley, 2004)

Orality and Commodity

As Temsula Ao observed, globalisation-induced modern media and digital space gave orality a new exposure. While talking about the growing market of tourism in the Northeastern part of the country, Erik de Maaker (2020) noticed a common trend among the travellers, photographers and filmmakers, both from inside and outside India, to visit “real”, “traditional” and “animist” culture of the people of the hills, without looking into the ethnic differences and varied literary expressions. To him, the stereotypical portrayal and the imposed homogeneity “fulfil a demand in a national and global market, where audiences want to locate ‘tribal’ or ‘indigenous’ people in nature, and in a timeless past” (Maaker, p. 16-17). This trend magnified after the emergence of new media and cyberculture and the young generation of this region, which “is quickly becoming one of the fastest-growing markets for online retailers” (Hasan, p. 135), contributed to this process in a significant manner. Urban musical bands of the Northeast, like Shillong Chamber Choir, who “performed at the Rashtrapati Bhavan for visiting US President Barak [sic] Obama and Michelle Obama during their state visit to India” (Shillong Chamber Choir), and was commissioned for a video to promote electoral participation among the people of Meghalaya during 2014 Parliamentary Election, used oral narratives and indigenous lyrical forms as one of the components of their musical creation. Founded in 2001, Shillong Chamber Choir, with its music videos often set in the Northeast, propagate certain markers of the culture that hardly represent the immense diversity of the region. The visuals they use to depict the culture of Northeast, are overtly aestheticised and picturesque, and eventually fall into the same trap of simplifying and objectifying the cultural nuances.ⁱⁱ These videos, Hasan wrote, “blur(s) the distinction between different tribes and ethnicities, and presents young people from various parts of the Northeast region as a homogeneous, happy, purposeful, and trendy group” (Hasan 146) and by doing this turning the traditional oral verbal arts into a standardized consumerist product. This “systematic manipulation of signs” as Baudrillard would say, aims at “simulating a consumer totality” where diverse socio-cultural and linguistic identities could be contained within a grand narrative and be presented for collective cultural consumption (Baudrillard, p. 35).

The poets in discussion here are trying to create a counter-discourse to this homogenisation and commodification of oral narratives by the global market and media. The form of orality, represented by the urban bands or the contemporary photographers and film-makers, is

essentially different from how orality is conceived by TemsulaAo, Mamang Dai or Esther Syiem, all of whom, as a part of their project, compiled, translated, transcreated and adapted Ao, Adi and Khasi oral tales, myths and legends.

Contesting Commodification

It has already been discussed how Ao wanted to resist the “mindless” use of oral tales, expropriated from their cultural roots, becoming a saleable product in the consumerist market. Her insistence on telling the stories, and reviving the oral tradition is completely an opposite and conscious endeavour. In her words:

But now a new era has dawned.
 Insidiously displacing the old.
 My own grandsons dismiss
 Our stories as ancient gibberish
 From the dark ages, outmoded
 In the present times and ask
 Who needs rambling stories
 When books will do just fine?
 The rejection from my own
 Has stemmed the flow
 And the stories seem to regress
 Into un-reachable recesses
 Of a mind once vibrant with stories
 Now reduced to un-imaginable stillness.

(Ao, “The Old Story Teller”, 2021)

This ‘new era’ undoubtedly refers to the era of “education and modernization” which marks the commodification of Northeastern cultural identities and the way it is turning them into “mere brand names”. However, the mention of books in the above-quoted stanza, implies the dual purpose of resuscitating orality. Orality is facing threats from two apparently opposite forces. On the one hand, its existence has been endangered (“un-reachable recesses”) owing to the advent of writing and print culture, and on the other hand, it is appropriated, commercialised and converted into an exotic, monolithic tourist attraction by the dominant culture. Theodore Adorno, while theorising Culture Industry, argued that “[c]ulture today is infecting everything with sameness” (Adorno and Horkheimer 94) and this standardised modes of production gives rise to “pseudoindividuality” where “[t]he peculiarity of the self is a socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural” (Adorno & Horkheimer 125). Hence any cultural element can easily be turned into a homogenised commodity, having an exchange value determined by the fetishism regulated by the dominant economy. According to him, any resistance to this mass culture is “radically individual” which has “residues not fully encompassed by the prevailing system and still happily surviving, and marks of the mutilation inflicted on its members by that system.” (Adorno and Horkheimer 200) It is interesting to note in this regard that Ao, Syiem and Dai chose

the same tool of orality to subvert and resist the process of commodification of Naga, Khasi and Adi culture respectively.

Orality and Identity, Orality as Identity

Easterine Iralu pointed out the challenges that authors of Northeast often face due to the dearth of major publishing houses in the region as a result of which they are often compelled to approach the big publishing houses of Delhi, and encounter “a stereotyped expectation that Naga writers are capable only of producing politically charged writing or exotic folk literature in mediocre language” (Iralu 2004). The poems of Ao, Dai and Syiem can be placed in opposition to this discourse. They are not simply imitating the oral tales as these were told in their distinct cultures, rather they are trying to assume the role of the traditional storyteller, who reminds people of their roots and customs, of their history and identity, which have been flattened and homogenised by the standardised format of printed texts. Syiem wrote:

The conceptual notion of what the oral is has received a severe beating at the hands of the practitioners of the written. This is but a natural consequence of the evolution of the written medium in which priorities change and societies are no longer the homogeneous entities that they once were. In such a situation, then, what is clearly needed is retrieval of a kind. Before any attempts are made to do this, however, it has to be understood that lest the exercise itself prove self-defeating, the oral has, to use a Khasi term, its own *mgiew*, the imperceptible aura that in Khasi thought permeates all things living, and which gives them being and identity. (Syiem, “Negotiating the Loss” 81)

Syiem’s attempt to “retrieve” orality neither refers to going back to the nostalgic past, nor is she trying to romanticise the oral tradition as an escapade from contemporary reality. Rather, to her, orality is an existing and living tradition [as she named her essay “Orality Alive” (Syiem, “Orality Alive” 38)], an organic part of the Khasi culture, constantly changing its form and has the potential to capture all the modern complexities. Her poems bring up the legends of Khasi creation stories and make them speak of the political, social and cultural reality of her time. She wrote:

Forlorn ancestress.
As a child I believed in you.
As a young woman
I wished to uphold you
as my personal myth.
As of now,
I wish to preserve you
as a source of inspiration.

Shrewd historians
float theories about you;
and though you have been weighed

and found wanting,
I still chose to look upon you
as the source of my identity
from a distant time.

(Syiem, "Pahsyntiew", 2006, p. 26)

The "ancestress" in this poem refers to the myth of Ka Pahsyntiew, the daughter of U-lei Shillong, who was tricked into marrying a human being and from whom the clan of Syiem sprang. It is said that she, after giving birth to her warrior sons, went back to the cave she came from and did not return. The myth does not only talk about the origin of Khasi people, but also, in Syiem's utilisation, locates the oral tale within the ambit of the politico-cultural environment of Meghalaya and connects the myth to her "identity" ("the source of my identity"). It is worthwhile to note that in this poem, the word "*jalyngkteng*", the yellow flower, with which Ka Pahsyntiew was tricked, which Syiem turned into a metaphor for political deception and exploitation happening with the people of her community, was not translated into English. In other poems too by the poet ("To Bemsynda", "Ka Sohlyngngem's Dirge", "U Lymboit U Lymbiang") similar Khasi words, laden with a multitude of cultural and historical significances and kept in the original language, are found. In the words of Ngūgĩ waThiong'o, language is the carrier of culture, consisting of cultural images that come down to us through the long passage of time. He wrote:

Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place... Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being. (Thiong'o 15)

The use of Khasi words by Esther Syiem can therefore, be seen as a deliberate attempt on her part to indigenise the English she is using and make the language prepared to adapt the language of orality, which not only gives her an identity to reclaim but also connects her to her community.

Social identity theories contend that "the self is reflexive" and identities are formed through the individual's conscious relation to "social categories or classifications" (Stets & Burke 224-225). Henri Tajfel, prominent social psychologist of the 1970s, noted that an individual's social identity is conditioned by her/his association with a 'group' where the group serves two purposes. Firstly, it becomes the crucible where diversities in individual identities are subsumed to a noticeable, uniform pattern. Secondly, this sense of uniformity distinguishes the group (and the individual) from other categories and groups consequently creating a homogeneous idea about the group and resulting in the binaries of 'us' and 'them'. Analysing the writings on and about Northeast in this light, it becomes clear how the narratives as well as the choice of the medium in which these narratives reach the consumers, underline conscious/unconscious attempts to carve out a group identity by virtue of deliberate "depersonalisation". Considered as "[t]he central cognitive process in social identity formation", depersonalisation regards the notion of the self as one that is blended

with group characteristics “rather than as a unique individual” (Turner et al. 1987 cited in Stets & Burke, 231). This sense of depersonalisation, perpetuated by contemporary writings on Northeast, is contested by the counter-discourse of oral narratives that debunk easy categorisation and stereotypification.

Oral tradition, as seen by Sen and Kharmawphlang, does not only function as “a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary and historical past,” but also “articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reform and redress.” (Sen & Kharmawphlang) Mamang Dai said, apart from being “a simple recounting of tales for a young audience”, orality gives her “a sense of identity” (Singh, 2017). It is the knowledge of the oral tales, which are nothing but the “beliefs, determining way of life”, that “links the individual to a group” (Dai, “On Creation Myths” 4). While recounting the Khasi tale of the origin of *U HynniewTrep*, Esther Syiem echoed the same idea by saying that the tale gives a Khasi person an identity more complete “than the one that history has bestowed upon him” (Syiem, “Orality Alive” 44).

Reclaiming identity alludes to claiming back history. The contrast between legends and history, oral and written, indigenous perspective from within and the perspective of the “shrewd historians” from the outside, which becomes a recurring theme in the poems by Ao, Syiem and Dai, implies the proclamation of identity against the imposed generalization by the popular discourse. Ao wrote:

Then came a tribe of strangers
 Into our primordial territories
 Armed with only a Book and
 Promises of a land called Heaven
 Declaring that our Trees and Mountains
 Rocks and Rivers were no Gods
 And that our songs and stories
 Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense.

(Ao, *Book of Songs*, 2013, p. 297)

Similarly, in Mamang Dai:

The history of our race
 begins with the place of stories.
 We do not know if the language we speak
 belongs to a written past.
 Nothing is certain.

(Dai, “An Obscure Place” 2021, p. 85)

The juxtaposition between “a Book” and “songs and stories” in Ao’s poem or the contradistinction between “history” and “stories” in Dai’s poem indicate the poets’ intention of replacing one with the other, and thus reverse and subvert the process of the official historiography.

Nevertheless, orality in the poems by these three poets were not only mere references. The poets imbibe Ao, Khasi and Adi tales, myths, legends, shamanic chants and other oral expressions into the poetic form as well as the content. Dai wrote:

Remember
 the river’s voice,
 Where else could we
 be born, where else
 could we belong,
 if not of memory
 divining life and form
 out of silence,
 Water and mist,
 the twin gods
 water and mist
 And the cloud woman
 always calling
 from the sanctuary
 of the gorge...

(Dai, “Missing Link” 2011, p. 65)

Apart from recalling the Adi myth of twin gods, the poem imitates the short-paced free flowing speech of an invocation chant. The first line of each stanza of this poem repeats the word “remember”, which refers to the significance of memory in oral traditions. Mary Carruthers observed that “valorisation” of memory is a “hallmark of orality” (Carruthers, 1990, p. 12). The dynamics between memory and the act of remembering in oral societies has a compelling connection with knowledge and experience and often manifests itself through the repetitive use of composite formulas. The word “remember” does not only act as a mnemonic call to the self and the readers to be aware of one’s identity, but also resembles the formulaic structure of an oral composition. The use of formulaic structure can be seen in Ao’s “Stone-people from Lungterok” (Ngangom&Nongkynrih, 2009, 1), which follows the structure of an oral praise poem, where each stanza starts with the word “stone-people.” Similarly, Syiem also refers to bird-chant in her “Ka Sohlyngngem’s Dirge” and reproduce the effect of an oral repetition in the following lines: “woman without means/ has no right to love,/ no right to love/ woman without means,/ has no right to love,...” (Syiem, “Ka Sohlyngngem’s “Dirge”, 2021, p. 44).

Even in the content Dai, Ao and Syiem recall the mythical and animistic past of pre-Christian Northeast, the legendary tales, the pastoral romances. “Ka Sohlyngngem’s Dirge” talks about a popular Khasi tale of lovers turning into birds, “Stone-people from Lungterok” refers to the myth

of Ao Naga origin, Dai's poems have numerous references to different Adi myths and popular tales. Wong observed that "Mamang Dai's nature poetry is recognisably animistic in its messages" (Wong 74). She also noted that "[t]he incantatory rhythms of Dai's poetry suggest hybridization with the vernacular chants of the peoples of the eastern Himalayas" (Wong, 2013, 74). Myths in the poems of Dai, Ao or Syiem, are not invoked to make their poetry more exotic and thus add materials to the process of commercialization of Northeastern culture, rather myth functions in a more personal and communal level, it revises the communal ties and calls for a collective identity.

However, though all three poets are using orality as a tool to reclaim identity and resist the process of standardisation and commodification of Northeastern culture, the uniqueness and distinct nature of choosing their literary forms are very evident from their poems. They are very cautious about not echoing each other and falling into the same trap of subscribing to the process of homogenisation.

Scripting Orality

Can oral poems be written? Temsula Ao asked, "how have the literate, educated inheritors of such traditions dealt with their inheritance?" (Ao, "Writing Orality", 2007, p. 100). To answer this question, we may cite the example of the Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare, one of the pioneers of the AlterNative Poetry Movement, who wanted to capture orality in its truest form and published poems along with audio CDs. To him "the word as print can no longer carry the full burden of my voice" (cited in Newell, 130). The Canadian author Thomas King can also be referred to in this context. King wrote short stories mimicking the sentence structure of recorded interview clips of the aboriginal people of Canada published by the ethnographers (see King, 2013). Both of the authors wrote in English, and tried to capture the essence of orality in a scripted language. These attempts, nevertheless, do not take the readers to the oral sources, rather it create a hybrid space, or "fusion of elements" as suggested by Ao (Ao, "Writing Orality", 2007, p. 103), where the oral and the written interact. This interaction, she observed, "has helped such writers to move away from western, euro-centric models and has enabled them to create a totally new literature deeply immersed in traditional sensibilities but at the same time imbued with contemporary perceptions" (Ao, "Writing Orality", 2007, p. 103). The poets are well aware of the fact that oral tradition, a tradition so deeply rooted in the culture it originated from, can hardly be taken into another language, without risking its social, political and cultural values it embodies. Whenever orality is scripted, it immediately loses its performatory aspects, collaborative and interpolative nature, improvisation, audience participation, impact on auditory perceptions and so on. Writing orality calls for an aporia.

John Miles Foley, while discussing oral poems, proposed a "less centralized, more openended" (Foley, 2004, p. 12) model which included "written oral poems." Written oral poems, Foley argued, may seem "a contradiction in terms" but as important as other forms of orality. Being "topical and locally situated" these poems have "their language and style came from one world and their subjects from another" (Foley 26-27). This idea echoes with the notion of "secondary orality" as theorised by Walter J. Ong (Ong, 2002, pp. 10-11). Though the northeastern poets are writing in English, their way of indigenising the language by incorporating Naga, Khasi and Adi words, the use and reinterpretation of myths and legends, the inclusion of oral formulaic structure in their

poems, the influence of indigenous cultural and religious expressions locate them in the canon of “written oral poems.” Earlier it has been stated that Dai, Syiem and Ao actively participated in translations of different Adi, Khasi and Ao oral tales. These engagements with orality influence their writing to a great extent. Misra wrote:

When Mamang Dai records the ancient legends of the Adis preserved in the collective memory of the people, she uses the English language with the lyrical softness of an Adi rhapsodist chanting his songs amidst the hidden mountains. Her rich and vibrant language may not be her mother tongue, but she has made it her own in the most convincing manner. (Misra, “Crossing Linguistics Boundaries”, 2021, p. 3653)

Mamang Dai’s attempt to make the language “her own”, indicates the reclamation of identity, which has become a negotiated space of cultural hybridity due to colonisation and the cultural imperialism propagated by the globalised market. Bhabha argued:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2)

In the context of cultural expressions of the Northeast, orality thus serves the dual purpose of commodifying the culture in a homogenous “fixed tablet of tradition”, while simultaneously engendering a non-stratified, dynamic, heterogeneous hybrid space. This ‘space’, as appropriated in the poems by Ao, Dai and Syiem, not only resists and problematises this process of turning the diversified oral traditions into a singular, monolithic and anonymous estimation but also reinstates the individual agencies of Northeastern communities and celebrates their cultural identity.

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ⁱ In this discussion, the notion of anonymity is not synonymous with non-identity. Rather, it is treated as a distinct ontological category which makes identity lose its specificity and definiteness and thus turns it into an obscure existence.

ⁱⁱ Moral described the achievements of Shillong Chamber Choir as a marriage between “the folk from the northeast” and “the classical traditions of pan Indian songs and lyrics from its national anthem.” She wrote:

"As the crystal clear notes of the Khasi folksong spill into the silence of the country's impressive halls and theatres, members of the SCC's band in traditional clothing and jewellery, in their native *kynjri ksiar* and the regal *dhara* stand before a mesmerised metropolitan audience donning the material objects of the land they belong to while their music evokes the deep gorges and pristine valleys of the distant Khasi Hills in the country's borderlands." (Moral, 2021, 194-195) It is the showcasing of "deep gorges and pristine valleys" which led Hasan to opine that "(i)t... ultimately lapses into a clichéd representation of Khasi youth as Westernised and presents a highly simplistic depiction of political choice and empowerment." (Hasan 146)

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